



No. 7

THE PRO PATRIA MILL

By Gabe Bradford

RICO'S LANDMARK MILL...

*"How do I get to the
Pro Patria mill?"*

BACK IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS, any resident of Rico, Colorado, would have replied... "Go down Glasgow Avenue, then west on Mantz Avenue... You can't miss it." Completed by the end of 1902, this mill was the collection point for ore mined on the western slope of Dolores Mountain, east of the little mining town of Rico. [Many of the] mines on the mountain were owned by David Swickhimer, a banker, and one of Rico's leading citizens. Dave Swickhimer continued his activity in the mining industry with the digging of the Swickhimer Tunnel—later known as the Pro Patria Tunnel. [Dave obviously named his mining venture in a patriotic gesture, since "Pro Patria" means "For Fatherland" in Spanish.]

The Pro Patria Tunnel tied together most of the upper-slope workings on Dolores Mountain. From this central point, the ore was carried by an aerial tramway down the mountain and through Rico to the Pro Patria mill. Unfortunately for Mr. Swickhimer,

his Rico State Bank failed during the Panic of 1907, and he was forced to liquidate all his mining interests to repay his depositors.

The United Rico Mines Company, established in 1901 and headquartered in New York City, purchased the entire Pro Patria operation from Mr. Swickhimer. United Rico Mines Company already operated another mill in Rico, so the Pro Patria became its second concentrating plant in Rico. Unfortunately, this acquisition added further to the United Rico's problems, and the company was forced into bankruptcy in 1911. During 1912, the company was reorganized as the Rico Mining Company.

In 1908, one year after the financial panic, the Pro Patria mill was damaged in a fire. By the time United Rico's successor, the Rico Mining Company, finished remodeling the mill, it operated at capacity for only one year—1913. However, as it turned out, 1913 was a banner year for metals' production, exceeding the best years of the 1890's.



MONTE BALLOUGH PHOTO - COURTESY MARGARET BALLOUGH PALMER

MONTE BALLOUGH, a resident photographer in Rico, probably stood on the Enterprise Mine's tailings dump to focus his camera lens across

Rico during the winter of 1902. Elliot Mountain was covered with snow (on the center skyline), while Sandstone Mountain slopes off to the right.

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COURTESY MARGARET MATZICK
FROM "THE RICO ITEM," NOVEMBER 26, 1909

THE SAME PHOTOGRAPH has been enlarged and reproduced on the following three pages to show changes that were taking place in Rico. At the right, the RGS station grounds had a number of gondolas and boxcars spotted on yard tracks. The roadmaster's office was inside the old RPO car body, sitting at a right angle to the depot—where a locomotive was emitting steam. You can see that a room extended off the back of the wooden enginehouse. Houses in south Rico are in view (below).

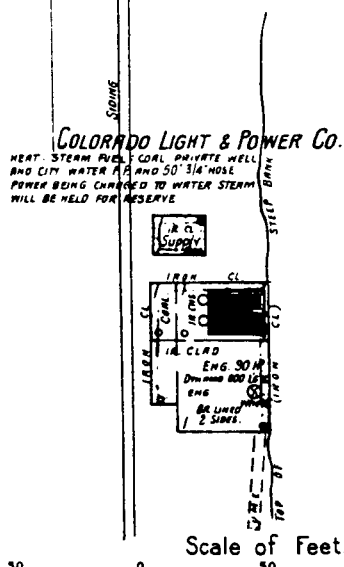
The recovery did not last—and after just two years of operation, the Rico Mining Company filed for bankruptcy. Nevertheless, during its two years of operating the Pro Patria, the Rico Mining Company assembled the largest group of Rico mining claims ever held by one company.

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MAPPING AND GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SERVICE
— 1899 —



MONTE BALLOUGH PHOTO - COURTESY MARGARET BALLOUGH PALMER

RICO WAS PHOTOGRAPHED again during the winter of 1902, shortly after the Pro Patria mill had been constructed. Monte shot two frames to cover the town from north to south.

Early in 1916, the Syndicate Mining & Milling Company bought the interests of the Rico Mining Company. During this period, they remodeled the power plant that served the mill. This coal-fired plant and its successors were called "lighting plants," even though they generated electricity primarily for the mills. As life continually teaches, timing is everything. In 1915, silver was quoted at 50 cents per ounce. Then, during World War I, the price of not only silver, but zinc, lead and copper, all climbed—with silver hitting \$1.00 per ounce by 1918. Unfortunately for the local workers and the com-

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JOSEPH E. BYERS PHOTO - RICHARD A RONZIO COLLECTION

JOSEPH E. BYERS was a photographer based in Telluride, and he had ventured over Lizard Head Pass one day about 1905, to see and shoot pictures of Rico. The ruins of the Hotel Enterprise stood, but the tall chimney had toppled. After a long winter, summer weather had reached Colorado's high country. On the mountain slopes above the mining town, aspen leaves were quivering on the trees with white bark. Joseph had pointed his camera lens toward Silver Creek for this historic view.

pany stockholders, in 1920 the mill was again forced to close. The Syndicate Mining & Milling Company and the Rico-Argentine Company were battling each other in the courts, and this had completely crippled all mining activities in Rico.

During 1923, while the legal battle continued, a new company was formed in Rico. Robert and Elizabeth Pellet created the Pell-

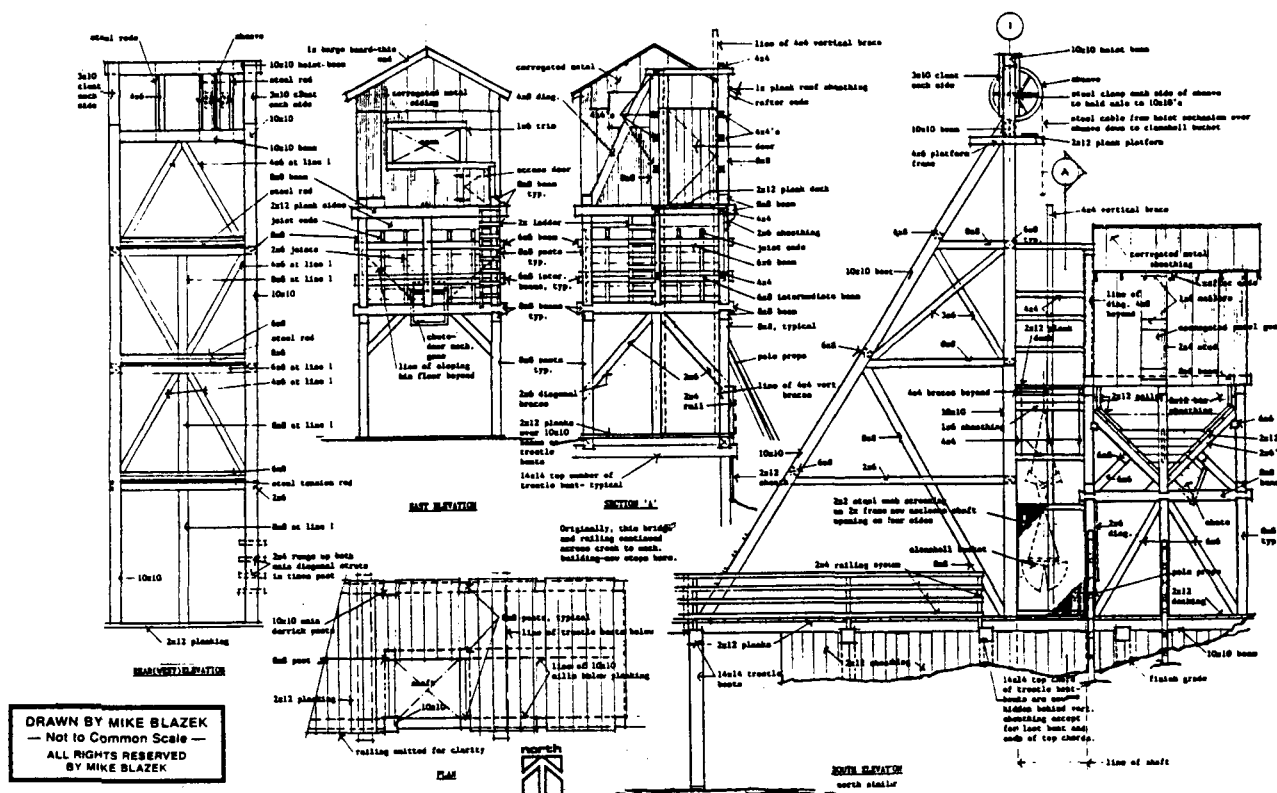
LARRY PLEASANT COLLECTION

THE RICO NEWS, dated October 24, 1903, told the shocking story of the terrible fire that consumed the Hotel Enterprise. The actual sheet size of the newspaper's front page is 18 x 24 inches.

Eyre Mining & Milling Company, with the support of the International Smelting & Refining Company, a subsidiary of Anaconda Copper. Their formation of this company would later prove to be the salvation of the Pro Patria mill.

However, in 1926, new ownership for the Pro Patria was close at hand—the Rico-Argentine Company finally prevailed in the courts. And again, the Pro Patria mill was about to bounce back. With the help of the United States Smelting & Refining Company, Rico-Argentine renovated the old Pro Patria mill.

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ATLANTIC CABLE HEADFRAME AND HOIST HOUSE

The 1926 renovation used many of the old buildings and foundations of the Pro Patria mill. All the machinery, however, was scrapped, and the latest state-of-the-art equipment was installed to increase the mill's efficiency to a higher level. Operating capacity was increased to 250 tons of ore a day, and the new mill was one of the most modern selective-flotation plants to be built in Colorado.

However, no sooner had the mill been renovated and put into operation than the Western Colorado Power Company completed an 11,000-volt transmission line to Rico. This made the old coal-fired power plant unnecessary (including the one that had been remodeled by the Syndicate Mining & Milling Company in 1916).

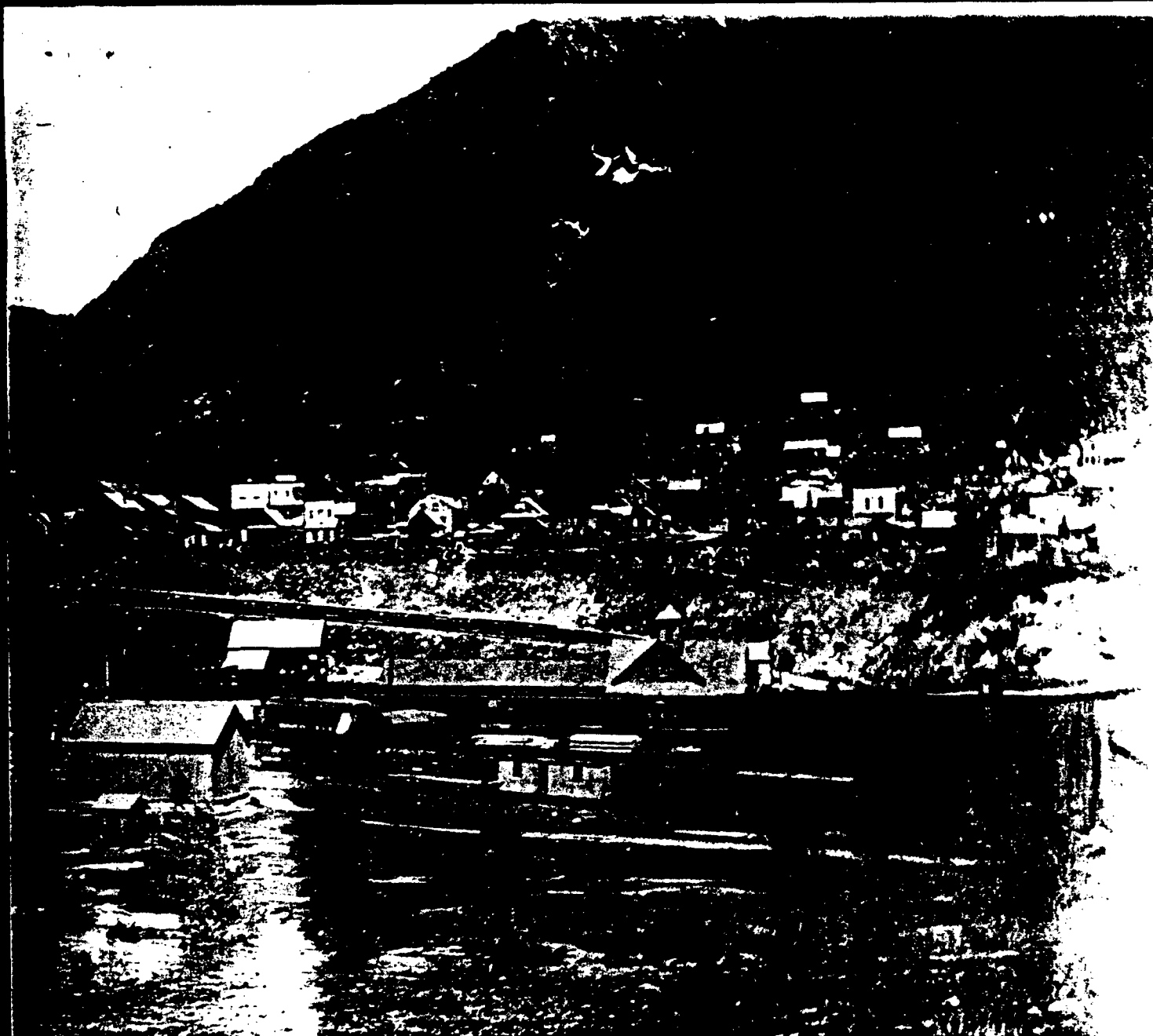
In 1929, the U.S. stock market plummeted. Shortly after that, metal prices collapsed again—and so did mining operations in Rico. The Great Depression was real, and only two mining-and-milling companies were left operating in Rico after the crash—the Pell-Eyre Mining & Milling Company and the St. Louis Smelting & Refining Com-

pany. Elizabeth Pellet had gone into politics (and she eventually was elected to the Colorado General Assembly, and later, she became a...[Colorado state] senator), but Robert continued in the mining business.

Exactly what happened has been lost in the mists of time, but somehow his operations came to include the newly renovated Pro Patria mill. It appears that he never owned it, but only had an option to operate it. He was backed by the International Smelting & Refining Company—and presumably, a fee or percentage of the profits went to Rico-Argentine, the owner of record. By exploiting a vein of high-grade silver ore, discovered just after the crash, Bob Pellet was able to keep the Pro Patria operating, and the workers on the job.

During 1937, with World War II looming on the horizon, metal prices began to rise. Copper, lead and zinc were in demand again, and Rico had all of them. Then, in 1941, the Rico-Argentine operation acquired most of the holdings of the International Smelting & Refining Company. In the process, Rico-Argentine got back full control of the Pro

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— PROPOSED CHANGES —
RICO STATION GROUNDS

RIO GRANDE SOUTHERN
 CA. 1910

JOHN W. MAXWELL COLLECTION

THIS SKETCH shows proposed additions to the Rio Grande Southern's yard at Rico. Notice that a large 10-stall roundhouse had been planned for this division point.

Patria mill. Lead and zinc were the principal ores mined and processed in Rico during the war years.

The Pro Patria mill closed just after the end of World War II, but it may have reopened in 1950 for a brief period. In any case, by the mid-1950's, the mill was in an advanced state of decay, and only the memories remain today.

NOTE: This story was previously published in the *Narrow Gauge and Short Line Gazette*.